

# Audience Engagement in New Media Ecosystem

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**Abstract** - *Interactive storytelling has emerged as a significant narrative paradigm in contemporary digital media, reshaping traditional relationships between storytellers and audiences. Enabled by advances in new media technologies, participatory narratives allow audiences to exercise agency, influence story progression, and engage emotionally with narrative worlds. This paper examines the mechanisms through which interactive storytelling enhances audience engagement, with specific reference to emerging media formats, viz., virtual and augmented reality, gaming, and social media. Adopting a qualitative, exploratory methodology based on secondary sources, the study synthesises narrative theory, audience engagement frameworks, and new media formats to assess the opportunities and challenges of interactive storytelling. Situating the analysis within the Indian media and entertainment context, the paper emphasises how cultural diversity, platform convergence, and digital accessibility shape participatory storytelling practices. The study contributes to the body of research on media and communication by offering an integrative conceptual structure for understanding interactive narrative as a key driver of audience engagement in contemporary, developing media ecosystems.*

**Keywords** - *Interactive storytelling; audience engagement; new media; virtual reality; Indian media; digital narratives;*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary digital media environments, storytelling has moved beyond linear narration and passive consumption. The proliferation of networked technologies, immersive platforms, and participatory digital cultures has enabled the rise of interactive storytelling, a narrative form that allows audiences to influence the story's progression, outcomes, and meaning. This transformation signals broader shifts in media consumption patterns, as audiences increasingly seek personalised, immersive, and participatory experiences rather than one-way content delivery.

Guided by these changes, this study addresses the central research question: How do interactive storytelling mechanisms in new media formats enhance audience engagement across the diverse, rapidly evolving landscape of Indian media and entertainment?

Interactive storytelling draws on narrative theory, game studies, and new media scholarship to reposition audiences as co-creators within narrative systems (Murray, 1997; Ryan, 2001). Drawing primarily on experiential immersion theory and narrative agency frameworks, this analysis privileges perspectives that foreground how user participation and emotional involvement shape narrative meaning. Emerging formats such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), interactive gaming, and social media storytelling have expanded narrative possibilities by

enabling user agency, emotional immersion, and sustained engagement across platforms. As a result, audience engagement is no longer understood solely as a reception-based phenomenon but as an outcome of interaction and participation.

Audience engagement has long been recognised as a central concern in media and communication studies, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). In the Indian context, these dimensions are evident in popular interactive experiences. For example, cognitive involvement is evident in games such as *Raji: An Ancient Epic*, where players fight demons with divine weapons and solve puzzles rooted in Indian mythology and folklore, requiring careful attention and narrative understanding. Emotional involvement is evident in the interactive reality adventure *Ranveer vs Wild with Bear Grylls*, where the viewer helps Bollywood star Ranveer Singh navigate dangerous cliffs in the Siberian wilderness, deepening engagement with the character. Behavioural engagement is evident in the success of regional storytelling apps such as *Pratilipi*, where users not only consume content but also compose and share their own stories, reflecting active participation.

Interactive storytelling deepens viewers' connection by enabling them to make choices, influence narrative trajectories, and form stronger emotional bonds with characters and story worlds. As a result, engagement becomes not merely a response to content but an outcome of participation and agency.

This study examines the evolution of interactive storytelling, the key mechanisms for audience engagement, the role of emerging media formats, and the challenges and future directions of interactive narrative practice.

Despite a growing body of scholarship on interactive narratives, much of the literature focuses on individual platforms or technologies in isolation. There remains a need for integrative, conceptual studies that examine interactive storytelling across multiple new media formats while foregrounding mechanisms of audience engagement. In response, this study proposes an original conceptual framework that systematically synthesises engagement mechanisms across VR, AR, gaming, and social media environments. By explicitly bridging research silos, the framework enables a comparative, cross-platform analysis of how participatory storytelling practices shape audience engagement across varied contexts. To address this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative, exploratory approach, drawing on secondary sources to analyse how interactive storytelling functions across VR, AR, gaming, and social media environments.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with interactive storytelling has grown alongside advances in digital and immersive media technologies. Murray (1997) introduced the concept of the cyberdrama, highlighting the potential of digital environments to support participatory narratives driven by user agency. Ryan (2001) further conceptualised interactivity as a spectrum, distinguishing between exploratory interactivity, in which users navigate pre-existing narrative paths, and ontological interactivity, in which user decisions alter narrative outcomes. Digital storytelling has become an increasingly popular way to communicate stories, experiences, and emotions through digital media (Patil, 2023). These tools allow storytellers to experiment with different formats, structures, and styles, giving them greater creative freedom to tell their stories.

Audience engagement research has increasingly focused on narrative involvement, immersion, and emotional connection. Ryan (2004) identified interactivity as a key feature of digital storytelling, enabling audiences to engage with the narrative in new and innovative ways. Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) conceptualised narrative engagement as a multidimensional construct comprising attentional focus, emotional involvement, narrative understanding, and presence. Interactive storytelling strengthens these dimensions by integrating choice, feedback, and consequence into narrative frameworks. Bell (2010) emphasised the importance of user agency in digital storytelling, as audiences become active participants in the narrative through their interaction with the technology.

With the emergence of VR and AR, scholars have examined how immersive technologies intensify narrative presence and emotional impact. VR enables fully immersive storytelling, allowing audiences to interact more deeply with the narrative world (Chen et al., 2019). This technology has enabled creators to craft highly engaging and compelling experiences for their audiences. Slater and Sanchez-Vives (2016) argue that immersive environments elicit a heightened sense of presence, leading to stronger emotional and empathetic responses. Moreover, gaming studies demonstrate how branching narratives and choice-making structures foster sustained engagement and replayability (Jenkins, 2004).

Contemporary studies also emphasise social media as a storytelling space where narratives evolve through audience participation, remixing, and co-creation. Jenkins et al. (2013) note that social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have transformed how stories are shared and consumed, enabling greater audience engagement and participation. Similarly, Guo and Saxton (2014) contend that social media can increase the reach and impact of digital stories because they can be readily shared with large audiences.

Recent empirical research from India offers emerging evidence on how interactive and immersive formats influence audience engagement in local contexts. However, these studies examine interactive narratives within platform-specific silos rather than across convergent media environments. There remains a need for integrative studies that explore interactive storytelling across multiple new media formats, with an explicit focus on the mechanisms of

audience engagement. This paper seeks to address this gap by synthesising insights relevant to contemporary Indian media environments.

## III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the evolution of interactive storytelling in the context of new media environments.
2. To analyse the key mechanisms through which interactive storytelling enhances audience engagement.
3. To explore the role of emerging media formats such as VR, AR, gaming, and social media in facilitating collaborative narratives.
4. To identify the challenges and constraints associated with interactive storytelling practices.
5. To assess the future potential of interactive storytelling in reshaping narrative experiences and audience participation.

## IV. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design that draws on secondary sources, including academic journals, books, conference proceedings, industry reports, and credible digital media, on interactive storytelling, audience engagement, and new media technologies.

## V. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

### A. The Evolution of Storytelling

Historically, storytelling has been a one-way communication process in which the storyteller conveys a narrative or experience to an audience. With the advent of technology, this paradigm has shifted. Interactive storytelling incorporates elements that enable audiences to influence the narrative's outcome. For instance, platforms such as Netflix have explored branching narratives, as seen in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, where viewers make decisions that shape the storyline.

This evolution is marked by the emergence of digital interfaces and tools that enable new forms of narrative expression. Innovations such as immersive gaming and interactive films signal a shift from passive consumption to active participation, positioning the audience as an essential part of the narrative. In India, interactive storytelling has become integral to narrative construction across multisensory audio and visual formats, including television, OTT platforms, radio, podcasts, video games, social media, and immersive media such as VR and AR. These platforms use new tools in diverse ways to engage audiences.

## B. Mechanisms of Audience Engagement in Interactive Storytelling

Key mechanisms for audience engagement in interactive storytelling are as follows:

1) **User Agency:** A defining feature of interactive storytelling is choice. User agency enables audiences to influence the direction and outcomes of the storyline, fostering a sense of ownership and participation. Audiences feel more invested when they can make decisions that affect the narrative. For example, in interactive games like *Detroit: Become Human*, players' choices lead to multiple endings, encouraging repeated engagement to explore different outcomes. Notably, players of *Detroit: Become Human* reportedly complete the game an average of 2.3 times, demonstrating a tangible increase in replayability driven by meaningful choices. Such metrics provide concrete evidence that agency-driven narratives lead to higher engagement, as audiences return to experience alternate storylines.

2) **Immersion and Presence:** New media formats enhance the audience experience. Immersive technologies such as VR and AR heighten the sense of presence by embedding users within narrative environments. Immersion is the psychological state of being deeply absorbed in a narrative, while presence is the subjective feeling of 'being there' within the mediated environment. Presence intensifies involvement by making the virtual or augmented world feel real to the user, deepening cognitive and emotional engagement. VR, for instance, places users within a 360-degree environment, allowing them to interact with characters and settings as if they were part of the story. This level of immersion can provoke intense emotional responses and foster a sense of presence that traditional formats cannot replicate.

3) **Emotional Connection:** Interactive narratives can create deeper emotional ties between the audience and the characters. They strengthen emotional investment by aligning the audience's choices with the character's outcomes. When audiences perceive their decisions as meaningful, empathy and narrative attachment intensify. By enabling users to make choices that align with their values and preferences, creators can foster empathy and emotional investment. Studies indicate that audiences are more likely to form connections with characters when they can influence their fates.

## C. Interactive Storytelling in New Media Formats

1) **Virtual Reality (VR):** VR offers a distinctive platform for storytelling by immersing users in a virtual environment. VR enables embodied narrative experiences, allowing users to explore story worlds from a first-person perspective. Spatial immersion heightens emotional and psychological engagement. Projects such as *The Invisible Hours*, in which players investigate a murder in a fully rendered VR world, demonstrate how the format can create

a riveting narrative experience that encourages exploration and interaction.

India has made notable advances in VR across gaming, healthcare, education, entertainment, and real estate, delivering interactive, informative experiences. For instance, VR simulations are used for medical training, virtual tours, and classroom instruction, demonstrating the technology's versatility. This cross-industry application highlights VR's wider impact on India's digital ecosystem.

2) **Augmented Reality (AR):** AR blends digital content with the real world, enhancing the storytelling experience. It transforms everyday spaces into interactive story settings that stimulate exploration and social interaction. *Pokémon GO* exemplifies how AR can engage users in their environments, turning everyday spaces into narrative landscapes that promote exploration and social interaction. Its applications span the medical field, education, entertainment, travel, marketing, and public safety, among others.

3) **Social Media Platforms:** Social media platforms facilitate participatory and collaborative storytelling through comments, remixes, and user-generated content, extending narratives across time and platforms. Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts have emerged as new venues for storytelling, enabling creators to share short, engaging content and encouraging audience participation through comments, shares, and user-generated content.

In India, apps such as Moj, Josh, Chingari, and YouTube Shorts are gaining traction among creators and audiences, driving engagement through user participation and regional-language discovery. Recent platform metrics highlight the extent of this participation: Moj reported over 100 million videos created in 2023 and an average of 2 million duets per month, reflecting active audience collaboration in co-creating narratives. Josh has also seen record engagement rates, with some widely shared challenges generating more than 5 million user-generated responses and duet chains. These metrics show that participatory mechanisms are not only possible but also widely used, underscoring the significant impact of social media on collaborative storytelling. Social media has enabled people from diverse backgrounds to share their stories and experiences, fostering a more inclusive narrative landscape.

4) **Gaming and Interactive Fiction:** The gaming industry has long utilised interactive storytelling to engage players. Gaming foregrounds choice, consequence, and narrative branching, positioning players as active agents within story systems. Titles such as *Life is Strange* and *The Walking Dead* series offer narrative experiences in which player decisions significantly alter the storyline, generating a sense of ownership.

India's gaming landscape is undergoing an extraordinary transformation, driven by next-generation technologies such as VR. Once dominated by traditional console and mobile gaming, the Indian audience is now embracing immersive

VR gameplay. India's indie game scene is on the rise, with more studios developing games that draw on Indian history and culture. Games such as *Raji: An Ancient Epic* and *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* are rooted in Indian mythology and folklore and are acclaimed for their engaging storytelling, graphics, regional art styles, and cultural authenticity.

Content creators have recognised VR's potential to deliver deeply engaging experiences that not only entertain but also educate and inspire users. The blending of technology, creativity and cultural infusion in VR gaming has opened new frontiers, positioning India as an important player on the international stage.

## VI. CHALLENGES AND ISSUES

While interactive storytelling in new media formats offers exciting opportunities, it also poses challenges.

### 1) *Technical Thresholds and Prospects for Innovation:*

While not all audiences currently have access to cutting-edge technologies such as VR headsets, this limitation highlights a threshold ripe for innovation. The high cost of VR hardware and premium devices can limit participation, yet this challenge underscores the potential for affordable, accessible solutions to expand audience reach. As more innovators develop cost-effective alternatives and simpler user experiences, these technical thresholds can become catalysts for wider adoption. Additionally, while varying levels of technological literacy may affect the ability to fully engage with interactive formats, this gap presents an opportunity for creators and educators to design more user-friendly interfaces and targeted outreach, thereby supporting greater equity and participation.

2) *Narrative Complexity:* Introducing interactivity can complicate story structures. Creators should carefully balance user agency with coherent storytelling to ensure that multiple narrative pathways remain engaging and logically sound.

3) *Audience Diversity:* Engaging a diverse audience in India requires understanding varied preferences and expectations. What appeals to one demographic may not appeal to another, underscoring the need for inclusive approaches to interactive storytelling. Adopting an inclusive lens involves not only content but also accessible design. For instance, a language-agnostic interface, customisable subtitles, and screen-reader compatibility can make interactive presentations more welcoming to users with diverse linguistic backgrounds and abilities. By prioritising accessibility, creators can reduce barriers to participation and ensure that engagement opportunities are available to people across diverse regions, languages, and physical abilities. Presenting practical design strategies thus offers tangible pathways to promote meaningful, widespread audience involvement.

4) Another challenge is the public's limited awareness of VR gaming. While the gaming community is quick to adopt

new technologies, many potential users are unaware of the possibilities VR offers. Additionally, there is a need for localised content that appeals to Indian audiences. By designing games that depict the country's culture and values, developers can attract a broader user base.

5) Increased reliance on new digital media may diminish authenticity or lead to the homogenisation of storytelling. It is therefore important to ensure that storytelling evolves in ways that preserve diversity and meaning.

6) As interactive formats become more widely adopted across gaming, OTT platforms, branded content, and social media storytelling, understanding how audiences across the Indian subcontinent engage with participatory narratives remains a challenge for content creators, broadcasters, and digital storytellers.

## VII. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As technology continues to advance, the future of interactive storytelling looks promising.

1) *Trends in Interactive Storytelling:* Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) may enable more personalised storytelling experiences. AI-driven narratives can adapt to individual preferences, making each engagement unique.

2) *Collaborative Storytelling:* Platforms that allow multiple users to contribute to a single narrative (e.g., collaborative writing tools) could promote community participation and co-creation, expanding the possibilities of storytelling.

3) *Transmedia Storytelling:* Integrating multiple platforms to tell a single story can enhance audience engagement. For example, a story might unfold across video games, social media, and traditional media, encouraging exploration across several formats.

4) With improvements in internet services, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, and the availability of affordable smartphones, India has tremendous growth potential, particularly in vernacular languages and regional content.

5) In VR gaming, there will be a growing focus on AR/VR integration, blockchain gaming, and immersive simulations.

## VIII. DISCUSSION

Storytelling has played a central role in cultural transmission, education, and entertainment throughout history. Modern media formats have become increasingly influential communication channels, fostering closer connections between audiences and storytellers. These formats are reshaping narratives, boosting audience engagement, and reflecting India's cultural dynamics. They also provide creators with equitable opportunities to reach audiences in meaningful, intimate ways.

Indian content creators have explored uncharted avenues to reach audiences in innovative and engaging ways. They

have leveraged new media formats to enhance heritage storytelling by adapting folklore, mythology, history, and cultural legends for modern audiences while preserving linguistic and cultural diversity. Regional content has succeeded due to multilingual audiences, the nationwide availability of affordable smartphones, and renewed interest in digital content. New media formats have enabled a restyling of the storytelling landscape, enhancing cultural continuity and social awareness.

Modern media offers intimate, in-depth storytelling, which is especially appealing to younger, urban audiences seeking content that aligns with their lifestyles and interests. Social media has enabled niche voices and underrepresented perspectives, as well as broader representation of voices from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, to reach wider audiences. Indian content creators can now connect with local and global audiences simultaneously, a notably valuable feature in a country with such broad cultural diversity. They play an important role in reviving and conserving classical literature and spiritual heritage, upholding regional identity and linguistic heterogeneity, and providing space for cultural expression in an increasingly globalised world.

With talented developers, designers, and innovative start-ups, India is well-positioned to produce high-quality VR games that rival international standards. The rise of VR gaming in India can be attributed to numerous factors, including advances in hardware, the availability of affordable VR headsets, and the widespread adoption of smartphones. The convergence of affordable tech talent, a growing gamer base, and global outsourcing demand makes India a hub for VR gaming.

Social media has democratised access for the less tech-savvy, making it more accessible to a diverse audience. It has gained ground across the country, driven by mobile penetration, enabling audience participation and collaboration in storytelling across cultures and languages. Social media has also motivated audiences to become content creators.

It is fascinating to see that in India, alongside the "interactive choice-based" shows, participatory digital platforms like *Pratilipi* co-exist, driving engagement through community-led interactivity. *Pratilipi*, a social storytelling ecosystem, bridges the gap between rural and urban audiences, building a collaborative relationship between creators and community that spans linguistic and geographical boundaries. It has a low barrier to entry, as it works on basic smartphones and low-bandwidth connections, making "participatory digital culture" accessible to those without expensive hardware. Effectively, *Pratilipi* is a 'social media' for people in small towns and rural areas. It is scalable: a story born on a mobile screen in a small village can become a high-production-value web series.

Interactive storytelling in India is evolving from simple "choose-your-own-adventure" formats to deeply integrated, participatory experiences that bridge the gap between urban digital users and rural traditional audiences. This shift from "audience" to "participant" is driven by technologies that enable co-creation, in which users' actions or inputs fundamentally shape the story.

In India, gaming is becoming the primary medium for "participatory storytelling," in which the player's choices or skill level determine the outcome. The Indian gaming industry is shifting towards immersive, narrative-driven experiences that blend Indian cultural heritage with modern gameplay mechanics to appeal to both local and international audiences. *Raji: An Ancient Epic* is a prominent example of an Indian game that has achieved global acclaim. Homegrown game developers are tapping into India's vast reservoir of cultural content to create innovative games that resonate deeply with local audiences while enchanting global audiences.

## IX. CONCLUSION

New media formats and engagement mechanisms have transformed the Indian storytelling ecosystem, redefining audience engagement through participation, immersion, and agency. Using these tools, storytellers can craft new narratives that enhance audience engagement, enable deeper emotional connections, and create more personalised experiences.

Mechanisms such as user choice, immersive environments, and emotional alignment play a critical role in enhancing audience engagement across new media formats. Technologies such as VR and AR intensify narrative presence, while gaming and interactive fiction foreground decision-making and narrative consequences. Social media platforms also extend interactive storytelling by enabling audience participation and collaboration.

Key challenges in interactive storytelling include technological accessibility, platform literacy, narrative complexity, cultural specificity, and audience diversity. These challenges highlight the need for creators and researchers to harmonise innovation with equity and narrative coherence.

Interactive storytelling in India has considerable potential to reshape narrative practices in an increasingly digital and participatory media environment. As technologies continue to evolve, the success of interactive narratives will depend on creators' ability to meaningfully engage audiences, build emotional connections, and adapt to diverse cultural and technological contexts.

## X. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant at the theoretical, industry, and contextual levels. Theoretically, it integrates narrative theory, audience engagement frameworks, and new media studies to conceptualise interactive storytelling as a distinct narrative paradigm.

Across industries, the findings offer insights for Indian media and entertainment stakeholders navigating participatory content strategies across OTT platforms, gaming, and digital media. Understanding engagement mechanisms is critical in India's competitive, rapidly expanding digital media ecosystem. OTT platforms, for instance, can incorporate interactive features such as branching narratives, audience polls, or user-driven story elements to deepen engagement and differentiate their offerings. They can invest in developing localised, inclusive, interactive content that reflects diverse cultural,

linguistic, and regional narratives, thereby reaching broader, more engaged audiences.

By emphasising mechanisms such as user agency, immersion, and emotional involvement, the research extends existing discussions of narrative engagement beyond linear media. This integrative approach addresses a key gap in the literature, which often examines interactive narratives within platform-specific silos rather than across convergent media environments.

In the Indian context, the study emphasises the importance of cultural specificity, linguistic diversity, and digital accessibility in developing interactive storytelling practices. It highlights the potential for Indian creators to innovate within global trends in interactive storytelling while remaining grounded in local narrative traditions.

As Indian content creators increasingly engage with immersive media, gaming narratives, and participatory social media storytelling, this research highlights India's potential not only to adopt but also to innovate in interactive storytelling. The study thus provides a foundation for future empirical research and policy-oriented discussions on digital storytelling, audience engagement, and media innovation in India.

#### XI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and conceptual analysis, which restricts direct assessment of audience behaviour. Future research could adopt more systematic sampling methods to enhance objectivity and replicability. Further investigations could incorporate empirical methods, such as audience surveys, ethnographic studies, or experimental designs, to evaluate engagement outcomes.

Further studies could examine interactive storytelling in regional languages, grassroots digital narratives, and comparative analyses of Indian and global interactive media practices. Longitudinal research into evolving audience engagement behaviours across platforms would also enrich the field.

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